

SOCIAL STRUCTURE

During the festival of Kētrappa at Bēṅṅar, the Poleyas may not be⁶³ seen by any high caste villager till the eighteenth day of the festival, 621 but on the eighteenth evening they march in procession with 796 pipe and drum to the Kētrappa temple and watch the ritual from 776 a nearby knoll. They bring offerings of fowls to Kētrappa, and the birds are decapitated by Mēḍas, who have an important part in the festival. The Kētrappa festival seems to be an extreme instance of the exclusion of Poleyas. In the festivals of other village-deities they participate to a greater extent, though on a different level from the rest.

Every village has an hereditary headman called *takka*. It is the 622 headman's duty to see that the village greens (*mandus*) where [364] dances and dinners are held, and the village assembly meets, are [363] kept in good condition. He has to ensure that the bridges and ferries in the village are in constant repair and that the village [485] tank is clean. He has to look after pilgrims and travellers passing through the village.

Coorgs have a keen appreciation of leadership and precedence. 622 From their folklore it appears as though they are incapable of 829 conceiving of any group, of no matter what, without a leader. The epithet consistently applied to a headman is '*mūpayānda*' which means 'precedence-having'. A sense of precedence and respect for seniority helped to introduce order into their meetings, just as a respect for precedents produced a consistent body of decisions on any particular matter.

Formerly a headman wielded great influence in his village (or 622 *nāḍ*), and a good headman was a powerful factor for stability. If the 623 headman was a bad man, the entire village was ruined: as a pro- [539] verb has it, 'when the *takka* is a loafer the entire village is like the area inhabited by Untouchables'. In the management of village affairs and the settlement of village disputes the headman was assisted by an assembly consisting of the representatives of the various *okkas* in the village. The assembly was called *kūṭa*, which means a 'gathering' or 'group'. It met on one of the several greens [367] in the village. There were separate village greens for transacting business (*pañchāyati mandu*), for dancing at the harvest festival (*ūr mandu*), a third for dancing at the festival of the village-deity (*dēvara mandu*), and so on. Sometimes there was a roofed enclosure [344] (*ambala*) on the green, which provided shelter from rain and sun for the assembly to meet, and for women to watch the dances.

The village-assemblies were far more powerful in the past than 623 681

596 hereditary in certain *okkas*. The eldest member of the senior
622 agnatic branch succeeded to the office in question.

596 Every high-caste *okka* has to send at least one man and one
621 woman to a wedding, festival, or a common village task like repairing a road, or weeding a temple compound; and all the adult males in an *okka* are required to attend a village dance or hunt. A defaulting *okka* is fined.

596 The members of an *okka* have to live together from birth till
629 death. They are bound together by numerous strong ties, and they co-operate in performing common tasks. After death, they become ancestors who continue to show an interest in their *okka* and demand propitiation from their descendants. The *okka* is something very much more than the group of living members in it at any given moment. It is a continuum through time, and the body of living members at any particular moment form only points on it. Coorgs themselves clearly state that the *okka* has a longer life than its members. They are also aware that an individual lives, in a social sense, as long as his *okka*. There is a great desire for the continuance of the *okka*, and there is no greater calamity than its extinction. When an *okka* is threatened with extinction certain traditional devices are resorted to to perpetuate it.

596 The ancestral house and estate are sacred, and even today a
[342] Coorg likes to have a wedding or funeral performed in the ancestral house. The unity and solidarity of an *okka* find expression in ritual. Its strength is projected to the 'mystical' plane.

An individual is normally identified with his *okka*, but such identification of the individual with his *okka* is in extra-*okka* contexts, and it does not at all mean that the *okka* in question is undivided from within. Normally the elementary families inside an *okka* are potential groups of fission. The principles of segregation of the sexes and the unity of the members of a generation which run right through Coorg society are also at work inside the *okka*, uniting some members against the others. There are also tensions between individuals, especially among the women members.

596 Every Coorg *okka* is bound by the ties of friendship (*aruvāmé*) to
572 another neighbouring Coorg *okka*. This is a traditional relationship between two neighbouring Coorg *okkas*, and it involves certain ritual and social duties. It is frequently mutual, and affinal relations between the two friendly *okkas* are common.

596 Formerly every Coorg *okka* had one or more Poleyā or other low-

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[34] When the fortunes of a *nāḍ* were at a low ebb, the elders of that *nāḍ* went on a pilgrimage to the patron-deity of the *nāḍ* and prayed to him for the birth of a hero in their midst.

[723] Legends grew up about a hero. Chegeṭṭira Appanna is supposed to have accomplished everything he did before he was sixteen days old. The hero had power to curse. After he died, he became a powerful spirit, a *bira*.

The boundary of a *nāḍ* obtains importance on some ritual occasions. A groom passing in state through a *nāḍ* to the bride's village is given the 'plantain honour' at the boundary of the *nāḍ*.

634 Richter describes a custom which brings out the ritual importance of the *nāḍ*-boundary:

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782 In cases of sore afflictions befalling a whole village or *nāḍ* such as small-pox, cholera, cattle-disease, the ryots [peasants] combine to appease the wrath of Māriamma [the goddess Māri who presides over these epidemics] by collecting contributions of pigs, rice, coconuts, bread and plantains, from the different houses and depositing them at the *mandu* [green]; whence they are carried in a procession with tom-toms. In one basket there is some rice, and the members of each house on coming out bring a little rice in the hand, waving it round the head, throw it into the basket, with the belief that the dreaded evil will depart with the rice. At last the offerings are put down on the *nāḍ*-boundary, the animals are killed, their blood is offered on a stone, the rice and basket are left, and the rest of the provisions consumed by those composing the procession. The people of adjoining villages and *nāḍ*s repeat the ceremony, and thus the epidemic is supposed to be banished from the country. In still greater calamities, a flock of sheep is driven from *nāḍ* to *nāḍ* and, at last, expelled from the country.¹

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- [59] There is no social unit among Coorgs which is without a head. Every *okka* has a headman and the headman's wife is the head of [43] the women in the *okka*. A temple has a headman with a number of [72] officials under him. A village has a village-headman, and above the village is the *nāḍ*, and every *nāḍ* has at least one *nāḍ*-headman, and frequently more than one. The highest category of headmen are, [43] however, the headmen of *stnē* or *dēsha*, of whom there are eight in all. Coorgs have a keen sense of discipline, which is associated in

¹ *Manual of Coorg*, p. 170.

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their minds with leadership and precedence. In their folksongs, not only a group of men, but also a herd of cattle and a bunch of flowers have their leaders. And there the usual epithet by which a headman is referred to is *mūpayanda*, which means 'having precedence'. The sense of precedence is ubiquitous: formerly, when caravans from every *nāḍ* went to Malābar every summer, the senior headman's pack-bullocks marched ahead of the pack-bullocks of the others.

Ideas about precedence are expressed on ritual occasions. For instance, most festivals of Coorgs include the sport of shooting at a target (*kuri*): a coconut and, on either side of it, a plantain spathe are tied to the high branch of a tree, and the competitors have to shoot at the coconut from a distance. The headman of the village has the right to shoot first at the target. Again, at the village dance held during the harvest festival, the village-headman, or an expert dancer selected by him, leads the dance. The temple-headman comes next after the village-headman.

At the *nāḍ* dance, which is held a day or two after the village dance, precedence is very important. The dancers of each village forming part of the *nāḍ* gather together at their headman's house, whence they proceed to the *nāḍ* green with band. When the senior *nāḍ*-headman arrives with his men everyone present has to stand up. A mat is spread for him, and others may sit down only after him. If *nāḍ*-headmen from other *nāḍ*s come to the dance, they sit to the left of the host *nāḍ*-headman, observing a strict order of seniority between them. Every dancer is provided with a pair of sticks. The host *nāḍ*-headman leads the dance, with the guest *nāḍ*-headmen occupying positions immediately next to him. The temple-headman comes after the guest *nāḍ*-headmen, and the various village-headmen who are gathered there take up positions after the temple-headman.

The guests are received with band when they arrive, and after the dancing and sports are over, they are given refreshments which nowadays consist of coffee, soft drinks, fruits, and betel leaves and areca-nut. Each guest *nāḍ*-headman pays a *paṇa* to the hosts before leaving. The hosts accompany each guest a little distance, the host's band proceeding ahead of the party. When all the guests have left, the villagers conduct their own *nāḍ*-headman in state to his house. They dine in his house, after which they disperse.